

Msgr. Paul Tep Im Sotha

(1934-1975)



Paul Tep Im Sotha was born in 1934. He was a son of a teacher and his grandfather had been a court official. They belonged to the middle rank of the Khmer society where his father was not a Catholic and his mother was the one who brought him up in the faith. He studied in Saigon and had been at school with King Sihanouk. After the ordination of Simon Chhem Yen on November 7, 1957, the first Khmer Catholic priest, Paul Tep Im was the second to be ordained in 1959. Both went to study in France at the Minor Seminary of St. Roch of Montpellier in 1947. The two young Khmer seminarians passed their baccalaureate successfully, an exceptional achievement for Cambodians at that time. Another young Cambodian by the name of Joseph Salas followed the same track.

Simon Yen was ordained at the newly build cathedral of Phnom Penh while Tep Im was at the Cathedral of Paris. After his ordination, Tep Im took his theological studies at the Angelicum University of Rome. He was a man of notable intellectual achievements, with a doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome. His academic specializations were in the field of theology, canon law, and history. Milton Osborne, an Australian historian tagged Fr. Tep Im as a priest and scholar with a remarkable understanding of Cambodian society. He added that the young priest was not simply knowledgeable concerning his own religion but offered many insights into contemporary Cambodian Buddhism.

While in Rome in May 1962, Fr. Tep Im expressed his joy to see the famous television personality and American Archbishop Fulton Sheen. It was also the time when his concern over his motherland – Cambodia, grew deeper

as he cited in his Letter to Therese vander Borcht¹: “I am very nervous about the problem.” The writing in his Letters continued to narrate that a day after he met Archbishop Sheen, he met the Cardinal whom he called the “great senor”. He stated that in his meeting with the “great senor” he was disappointed because the cardinal did not know about the serious problem of 4,700 million people in Cambodia. At the time the young Fr. Tep Im discussed the situation, the “great senor” only listened for 15 minutes and have the conversation changed to collection matters, which made the young priest more disgusted.

Of that same month, Fr. Tep Im assumed that his superior, the “great senor” could not decide whether he is going home to Cambodia or not. He wanted to pack his luggage to go to a monastery to be at peace with God. He thought he doesn’t want to talk to a person who seemed to be deaf, not wanting to listen to him, referring to the “great senor”. However, young Fr. Tep Im thought that if he will be welcomed in the monastery, he will never hear about his motherland. Fr. Tep Im decided that until June of the same year, he has to stand-up and fight for his return.

His conversation with Archbishop Sheen was memorable to Fr. Tep Im, he believed that the Archbishop was concerned about Cambodia and gave him simple advice. The conversation for him was helpful and made him comfortable to see that there is a bishop who is interested of the problems not only in his diocese but of the universal church. Despite the young priest’s disappointment with the “great senor,” he still like to be a priest, because for him, a priest is wonderful, who would worry for others and let God worry for himself.

In July of 1962, Fr. Tep Im reflected that his life as a priest was nomadic, where he moved from one place to another. He thought that there were many challenges and his life was not all happy but mixed with concerns. He was still anxious in returning to Cambodia and his Letters confirmed this as he wrote:

¹ Msgr Tep Im has many letters to Therese Vander Borcht –Courtejoie. Henceforth this source will be referred to as, “Letters.”

“if they just put me in the cannon of the communists in Cambodia, for that, they don’t need to ask me if I want to do it.”

In August 1962, Fr. Tep Im finally made it to Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital. He was happy to see his fellow Cambodians who are as usual very gentle people. He wrote: “I can see how Cambodians are so gentle, like this morning when I visited the national bank where my mother is working, the people speaks with respect and gentleness.”

While enjoying the gentleness of the people in his beloved country, Fr. Tep Im also thought of the people in Europe, he said: “I am thinking about everybody very much.” This made him felt a little bit lonely even if he was enjoying the gentleness of the people around him.



There was still no bishop in Phnom Penh in September 1962. After a week in Phnom Penh, the young Tep Im was eager to know the people and thought that he needs to discuss the problem they were facing in Cambodia with seriousness. Although it was clear to him that he had no concrete duties yet at that time. His writing affirmed this which read: “actually, I don’t have the official function yet and I don’t want to have duties in six months.” The young priest meant that temporarily he would like to have no specific responsibilities in the diocese so he could freely go around the country to be with the people.

On a Sunday of September 1962, an evening mass was concelebrated with 25 priest including Fr. Tep Im. It was in honor of his feast day. At the mass, the new bishop gave his speech and Fr. Tep Im as well. People were impressed at the latter’s speech and were amazed of his ideas. After that speech, some priests came to him and simply shared their feelings. They openly revealed the pains and joys of the difficult apostolate they were facing in Cambodia.

For just a month in Phnom Penh, the people were surprised because the young priest started to work so hard. He also started to forget his loneliness

and not anymore thinking too much about the people that he associated in the past. He realized the great transformation and the necessity of his obligation. And in all his work, he always felt God's presence and faithfulness. Being passionate of what he was doing, his administrative skills amazed the people because they were not expecting of an immediate output of his initiatives.



The young Tep Im rubbed elbows with high government officials, people in the academe, the governor of national bank, and even the chief of state. He was so busy not only in meeting with people in all

walks of life but also in having speaking engagements all over the country. But in the midst of his very busy schedule, Fr. Tep Im was still faithful in celebrating the mass and attending to his pastoral ministry. His writing on this month stated that: "a sense of sacrifice is required, to forget about oneself for love."

As Fr. Tep Im wrote Therese in December 1962, he asked her to pray for him and his apostolate. He expressed that solitude exists and it is sometimes painful for him, but later, he explained that he began to like it. He felt that the solitude makes him closer to God. In the past, he revealed that he wants to listen to music once he felt lonely but afterwards he like more of the solitude without the music anymore. He would just close his room if he wants to be alone. He would often do it when he needs a personal space from many visitors coming into his office.

There were many times that he felt drained especially if a visitor discusses what he considered non-sense, such as when a visitor ask the price of the toothpaste in France. Some talks about puppy love, women talking problems with their husbands or rich people talking about their lifestyles. Fr. Tep Im wrote: "this is not the apostolate that I am familiar with or want to get

into, if they speak about God or natural love it would have been fine.” But very often, Fr. Tep Im would just listen with patience and a smile. He would usually lend them an inspirational or spiritual book to read. When people come to talk about their marital problem, Fr. Tep Im would always remember what his friend Therese told him, that he had chosen the best part - the celibacy, and that many are wrong not to appreciate the true value of it.

In January 1963, Catholic Action was launched in Cambodia. Fr. Tep Im organized the young people and they will meet three times a week. Fr. Tep Im wrote: “I think by the end of the year we will reach a hundred Catholic activists.” The activists are boys and girls from 16 to 25 years old. Later, 14 years old were accepted and older age until 50 were also in the group.



Fr. Tep Im began to start teaching dogmatic theology at the seminary in September 1964. In November of the same year, even if it is against his spirit, he accompanied a delegation of four priests and some lay from Europe for a Eucharistic Congress in Bombay. He organized the travel through Germany and India. He came back to Cambodia in the middle of December that same year.

Aside from his parish work, the Catholic Action, and teaching post at the seminary, Fr. Tep Im also started to get involved in religious dialogue with non-Christians by June of 1965. He wrote: “I have to go often to have contact with my Buddhist friends lay or monk who live in pagodas and monasteries.” He was passionate in this apostolate and enjoyed visiting his Buddhist friends including two high ranking officials of the Buddhists in Cambodia. He was so concerned that someday, by the grace of God, there will be a good relationship among Christians and Buddhists. He wrote: “we have many works but the real work of a missionary is the ‘Reign of God’ here on earth. Isn’t it a ‘Reign of God’

when Christians and Buddhists begin to respect each other and love fraternally? Aren't Buddhist monks are men of goodwill?" Fr. Tep Im revealed that a good friend who is a Buddhist monk helped him to translate and correct the liturgy text into Khmer. He asked the monk to correct the liturgy to make it more comprehensible and express it in simple language.

The translation of the scripture and the liturgy also appeared in Osborne's literature, he wrote: "we talked little of the war and much more of history and his own current and long-term project to translate the Bible into Cambodian." Osborne narrated that a translation existed, which was prepared by the evangelical missionaries from the United States, but Fr. Tep Im did not regard it as satisfactory. According to Osborne, the translation was excessively literal and could not be read with ease even by a highly educated Cambodian as far as Fr. Tep Im is concerned.

After his visit in China in September 1965, Fr. Tep Im felt that he was received in the church very well, more than he was before. He taught more courses at the seminary and new parish was added under his care. He worked closely with other priests, so he guessed that in only eight months, he had already traveled 8,000 kilometers around the country.



Osborne, met Fr. Tep Im in 1966 when someone suggested that he needs to see the Cambodian priest to get what he wanted to know and write about the Cambodians. He stated in his writing that not only Fr. Tep Im hoped that Cambodia will be totally liberated from France but also concerned of the necessity for the Cambodian Catholic Church to rid itself of residual links with France. He explained that Fr. Tep Im was concerned about the French priests who continued to be active in Cambodia, but only very occasionally did any of them speak Cambodian. Osborne made it clear that Fr. Tep Im since they met

thought that he and his fellow Cambodian priests had to think about the Cambodian Catholic Church in Cambodia, in Cambodian terms. He said that the young priest wanted to change the way their non-Catholic fellow countrymen viewed Catholicism, a view that was summed up in the faith being described as *sassana barang*, the “religion of the European foreigners.”

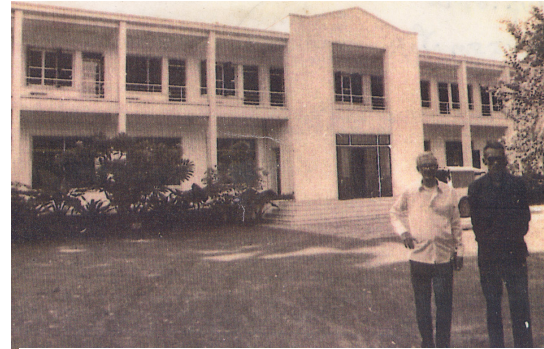


In 1968, the Holy See established the Prefecture of Battambang. Mgr. Paul Tep Im Sothajan was installed as the first bishop at the age of 35, in September 26th. The young bishop wrote: “I was very emotional on the day of my installation. There were bishops and the hundreds of people to see. There were many missionary priests and some of them around 80 years old, slim with long white beard. I was ashamed to preside the meeting because the youngest priest is 37 and the old priests came and knelt before me to receive the hug and kissed the ring as their sign of obedience.”

As a bishop, Msgr. Tep Im attended to more work. In October 1969, he started the construction of the bishop house² with an estimated worth of 2,500.000 Francs. Trips, meetings, and other works to do were just unending so as a result, he was confined in the hospital two times within four months. At the hospital, work continued, many concerns arouse and many people came to visit even if the nurses restricted the visitors.

² The Church in Battambang used to own the whole block of lot fronting the Preah Monivong High School in Battambang. Now it is occupied by Hotel Steung Songkae and Total Petrol Station.

Osborne was excited to see Fr. Tep Im when he came again to Cambodia in 1971. However, he had a hard time finding the young priest until someone from the presbytery beside Phnom Penh cathedral informed him that he could find him in Battambang. The historian wrote: “Not until I reached the Eveche, the bishop’s residence, and saw the Episcopal ring upon his hand did I learn



The Bishop's House in Battambang

that the priest I had known in 1966 was now Bishop Tep Im, in the Apostolic Prefect of Battambang.” Osborne continued saying that: “The failure of either of the French priests to tell me that Fr. Tep Im was now a bishop was a confirmation of all that he had said in 1966 of the readiness of his French colleagues to treat Cambodian priests as junior partners.”

In Osborne’s story, the bishop seemed unchanged from the man he had known in 1966, at the first glance. He described the bishop to have the same strong but welcoming face. But he is sure there was some change even if it is not easily definable. According to him, the suggestion of change in the bishop’s face was surely related to more immediate earthly concerns. He wrote: “He was a man who had seen what war meant and was going to mean to Cambodia.”



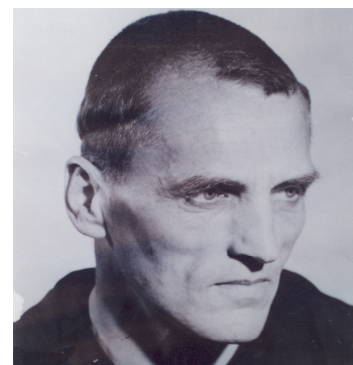
The Catholic Church in Battambang

Francois Ponchaud described in his book what an eyewitness reported regarding the last mass in Battambang. The report stated that on a Sunday of April 1975, Msgr. Tep Im celebrated his last mass in the church of Battambang where he gave general absolution, saying: “It is the last time that I bless you. I remit your sins, you who are here present and those who did not come.” The story continued that Msgr. Tep Im with Fr. Jean Badre, a

Benedictine monk and two young girl catechists tried to reach the Thai border.

They passed by Thmor Kol on April 24, 1975 and got stuck there because there were so many people and trucks on the road. A little after 5 o'clock in the afternoon, Msgr. Tep Im saw a familiar car. The driver of the car Claire Ly, a professor at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, searching for beddings at the baggage compartment. She was with her son and uncle. Msgr. Tep Im invited them to come with him to Chomnaom but Claire Ly was reprimanded by her uncle for talking to a foreigner and therefore exposing herself to the Khmer Rouge.

They rested in Chomnaom where Fr. Badre was the pastor of a budding Catholic Community and where he tried to found a monastery. There was nothing to fear in the area since it was a Catholic Mission station; he knew the people there and cared for their sick and wounded.



Fr. Badre

The account stated that on the evening of their arrival, or few days later, an Australian named Arnaldo Marini who was married to a Khmer came to ask them for shelter. Many people believed that Marini worked for the CIA and so Khmer Rouge came and abducted Fr. Badre and Marini. Another witness revealed that at eleven o'clock on April 30, Msgr. Tep Im and three others were under guard in the headquarters of the civil administration in Mongkolborey. The witness even talked to them and they said they hoped to be taken to the Thai frontier. The account went on saying that they remained at the Town Hall of Bat Trang for five days.

A Khmer Rouge named Soy then came to bring them to the border. But upon arriving at Spean Youn – the Vietnamese bridge, the four were instructed to get down from the car and to go down near the stream. As Fr. Badre, Marini and his wife, and Msgr. Tep Im went down as instructed and made to walk a few meters near a sugar palm tree, the Khmer Rouge machine-gunned them at their backs with an AK47 assault rifle. The four were stripped of their clothing and were abandoned just like the thousands of others who were scattered over

the sector of the rice paddies. Msgr. Tep Im's death was believed to be in early May of 1975.

In the early years of his vocation in the priesthood, the young Fr. Paul Tep Im wrote his friend Therese saying: "if the priest knows who he is, he will

love till death for God – who chose him... I know some priests who have suffered for others...someday their death will be blessed...Sanctification in the life of a priest."

As Osborne first met Msgr. Tep Im and was impressed right away not only of his intelligence but also of his strong faith and dedication, he asked himself how this urbane and highly educated and devout man sees the future? As he began to know the bishop more and more, he got the answer to his question. According to him, the bishop sees the future in terms of revolution, a revolution that was already in the making.

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Sources:

1. Osborne, Milton. Before Kampuchea: preludes to tragedy; Sydney. 1979
2. Ponchaud, Francois. The Cathedral of the Rice Paddy; Le Sarmet Fayard. 1990
3. Excerpts of Letters from Msgr. Paul Tep Im to Therese Vander Borcht
4. <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/btepim.html>



The Spean Youn